

1-1978

1978 Vol. 15: With Libermann at the Heart of Our Spiritan Vocation

The Generalate Team

I/D 15

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January 1978

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"The Poor and Abandoned"

Some younger Spiritans are asking . . .

Two events of last summer challenged us particularly: the Provincial Chapter of United States East and the meeting of Young Spiritans in Spain. In both instances, as in the Chapters of the previous year, one master idea was strongly re-affirmed: the need to get back to our original inspiration, to the intuition born in the heart of Father Libermann: **THE POOR AND ABANDONED.**

Take these two brief quotations as examples:

"Some younger Spiritans are asking if there are not fresh challenges today; urgent needs comparable to those to which the Province responded in former times. Is there not today as clear a call for holiness, charity and sacrifice as in the past? To answer such questions, our first endeavor must be to discern where God is calling us, and how we can respond to the needs of the poor and abandoned in the modern world which are calling us to unity. With the faith of Abraham, and in the spirit of those who founded our Province we must be ready to move out from where we are to the land which the Lord will show us, to a new tomorrow, to new orientations indicated by the signs of the times and the call of the Holy Spirit.

"Today there are new and urgent cries from poor and abandoned peoples, challenging us more than ever before as a Province to unite, to cooperate and to respond to see what we can do together toward helping these people at home and abroad. Any new orientations should be dictated by the needs of those peoples who are critically disadvantaged economically, socially and religiously." ("Adopting a Vision for the Future", Provincial Chapter, U.S.A. East, June 1977).

"We suggest that every Province and District make a critical evaluation of all its works in the light of our special charism and disengage as soon as possible from those which are not truly for the benefit of those who are poorest, both materially and spiritually. Works which do not correspond to our end are a counter-witness to what the Congregation is supposed to be." (Meeting of Young Spiritans, Aranda, August 1977).

We hope that the Spiritan Studies Group will study in depth the implications of this intuition of LIBERMANN, because it is at the heart of our vocation as Spiritans. The rejuvenation of our Congregation will depend in great part upon our ability to grasp this "original youth of ours". As a start, we dedicate this issue to Our Venerable Founder*, hoping it will be helpful to have a few thoughts on the subject.

To understand Libermann's idea

The source of LIBERMANN's idea is to be found in his experience of God. He felt this experience deeply before he proposed it as a plan for his community.

We are not at first attracted by an institution or a congregation. We begin by liking a

Person. A vocation is like that at first: a personal encounter with Jesus Christ. Love for the Congregation comes later and is simply the sequel to a deeper love which came before. Only a personal experience of Christ within us and in the world can lead us to love the Congregation enough to place our life at its service. Without such a personal experience of the Lord deep within us it is not possible to understand LIBERMANN's idea, because we have to place ourselves at his vantage point in the faith in order to see what he saw.

A charism is also a vision based upon faith, a light from God. The danger is that we can

* Every year the February I/D has dealt with Libermann. We thought it better to publish it in January, in the hope that at least the majority of copies may reach their destination before February 2. (Editor's note)

encounter an already existing institution without ourselves going through the experience of love which gave birth to it. To enter the Congregation should mean first to enter the stream of love which caused it to flow forth as a congregation.

The poor people of God or the God of the poor

The heart of LIBERMANN's spiritual experience is his deep awareness of the transcendence of God: for him God is all.

At the novitiate in Rennes, Father MANGOT declared:

"We knew... that it was God who had taken possession of this servant and spoke to us by his mouth... We looked upon him as possessing the spirit of God to a very high degree." (N.D., I, pp. 531-533).

We read in Bishop GAY's recent book⁽¹⁾, the dialogue between Father CARBON and LIBERMANN when the former told him he had to leave the Seminary of St. Sulpice because of his sickness:

— *My child, I'm afraid I have hurt you.*
— *Oh no, Father Superior, you have not hurt me at all.*
— *How is that? Tell me how you feel.*
— *I am happy to be without any resources other than God alone."*

This was the position LIBERMANN took up before God in the decisive moments of his life: his conversion, his baptism, his sickness, his missionary vocation, writing the rule, giving spiritual direction, advising his missionaries. For him, everything was based upon the most fundamental truth of faith: God is all.

It was against this background that he lived his life. That is why he arrived at decisions slowly: he had to consult God, to talk to Him. But once convinced that something was the "divine Will", he hesitated no longer. As a man of the Bible, formed by Sacred Scripture, LIBERMANN could only go forward in the presence of God, — otherwise he waited. He waited for a sign, even if it meant being patient for ten years (as he waited to be cured of his sickness), even if it meant living for six months in the attic at Vicolo del Pinacolo in Rome.

It is also against this background that the characteristic elements of his teaching become clear: fidelity to God who is all, importance of the action of the Holy Spirit. All his decisions, all his advice, all his plans were the fruit of that attitude and it is impossible to understand his writings without it.

"I hope that Our Lord will continue to give me the grace He has given me up to now... I shall

live a life completely poor and employed only in His service; then I shall be richer than if I possessed the whole world and I defy the world to find a happier man than me..."

"My body, my soul, my being and my whole existence belong to God, and if I knew of any little streak in me that did not belong to Him, I would tear it out and trample it underfoot in the mud and dust. Whether I be a priest or not, whether I be a millionaire or a beggar, all that I am and all that I have belong to God and to nobody else but Him." (Lettres Spirituelles, I, 10).

To serve the poor I must first be poor myself

Ready to follow the slightest indication of God's will, LIBERMANN did not settle down anywhere: neither in Judaism, nor in the security of the Issy Seminary, nor in his function as novice master at Rennes, nor in the solitude in Rome which he enjoyed so much.

"I have left Rennes for good. This was a very imprudent — if not crazy — thing to do, according to all those who judge things as men of the world. My future there was assured... Now I don't have anybody... in whom I can place my confidence. I have nothing. I don't know what will become of me, how I shall keep alive and continue to exist. I shall lead the life of someone despised, forgotten, neglected, lost, — as far as the world reckons. I shall be disapproved of by many of those who used to like me and respect me. I shall perhaps be thought of as ungrateful, proud, — be scorned or even persecuted... (But) don't be worried or afraid. Try to believe that I am the happiest man in the world because I have nothing but God... He will give me His strength and His love and that's all I need. All my hope is in Jesus and Mary." (Lettres Spirituelles, II, 300-302).

One situation followed another, and, each time, LIBERMANN disengaged himself and moved on. There was no lack of pretexts he could have taken advantage of to remain in one place or another, offering his services for various tasks which might have seemed within the scope of his health and his capacities. But for him the most important thing was always to be at God's disposal. When he took up a work, it was never considered definitive. He was not attached to Bourbon, or to Guinea, or to Madagascar. He was only attached to God. It was this kind of love that made him discover and understand the poorest and most abandoned there where they are.

Faithfulness to the original idea

From his first ministry — the formation of priests, to his last — the evangelization of the

⁽¹⁾ GAY, Mgr. Jean, *Libermann, juif selon l'évangile*. Beauchesne, 1977, P. 78. (Paraphrase of N.D., I, pp. 159,596).

Blacks, LIBERMANN saw his mission develop in terms of a constant criterion: the care of "neglected and abandoned" souls. He always understood this concern of his as a way of evangelizing, of proclaiming the Gospel. For him, his Congregation was by that very fact a missionary congregation. A year before his death, he wrote:

"To evangelize the poor: that is our general purpose. But, nevertheless, the missions are the principal object of our endeavors, and, in the missions, we have chosen the most miserable, the most abandoned souls. Divine Providence has made our work for us among the Blacks, both in Africa and in the Colonies. No one can deny that they are the peoples the most miserable and most abandoned up to this time. We would also like to work for the salvation of souls in France, but always having the poorest people as our principal objective, without, however, abandoning those who are not." (N.D., XIII, p. 170).

This fundamental mission will not be confused with any one or other of his geographical locations. Whether the signs of Providence have him working for the abandoned souls in Bourbon, or prompt him to go to the aid of the poorest people in Guinea, in Bordeaux, in Germany or in the rural areas of France, he has only one thing in mind: to fulfill what he saw as the *raison d'être* of his own life and of his society: the care of the most abandoned.

Of course, within this basic project, certain tasks quickly became priorities, — like the far-off missions. He even set it down in the 1840 Rule: "*The Mission which Our Lord gives us now is that of the Blacks . . .*"⁽¹⁾ but he does not *a priori* exclude any form of apostolate. He allowed some priests to work in a seminary which was in a state of urgency, and he did not do this grudgingly, in order to avoid greater evils or under pressure from some individuals' "personal projects". For him it was a case of service to the most abandoned, just like the foreign missions.

Thus no territory, no project, monopolized his efforts. The important thing for him was to feel that God was giving him a sign by means of the various situations of abandonment or of urgency. He dreamed of foundations and works almost everywhere.

The poor whom Libermann loved

If we take in their totality the writings he left us, it becomes clear that for LIBERMANN the expression "poor, abandoned, neglected souls" has a double connotation: **spiritual**, but also **material** poverty, abandonment, neglect. If a people which is poor in material goods lives in a Christian manner, it is not a part of the Congregation's project. Similarly, if a people with is poor in spiritual goods has a

satisfactory life materially speaking, it does not form part of the Congregation's specific end either.

Concretely, for LIBERMANN the poorest, most abandoned, most despised were:

Surely, first of all, **those who count for nothing** humanly or religiously. He said of the slaves and of those recently liberated: "*These people, so miserable in the supernatural order, are so also in the natural order . . . The Whites despise them so much that they treat them like animals. There is no class of people so badly treated and so despised.*" (N.D., III, p. 77).

Also **those who are despised** by reason of the judgments passed upon them, "*Those whom people look upon as of inferior rank (Provisional Rule), those who are "treated as the outcasts of nature".*" (N.D., VI, p. 433).

Also **those who are without hope**, "*abandoned and despised by everybody . . . the most unhappy and most neglected . . . both as to nature and as to grace, for this world and for the next, and without any hope of rescue.*" (N.D., VI, pp. 85-86).

Finally, **those whom nobody bothers about**, "*Poor, despised people, whose needs are very great and who are the most neglected in the Church of God.*" (Provisional Rule, p. 24, art. V).

"*At the very doorstep of Europe, there are millions of people bowed down by ignorance and misfortune, and nobody thinks of helping them out of it.*" (N.D., VIII, p. 223).

"*We are only the rag-pickers of the Church, we take what the others don't want.*" (N.D., VII, p. 292).

Beyond history: a prophetic insight

The charism of a founder places him much less in the past than in the future: it has much more to do with a plan, a hope, than with a memory. It is by this prophetic gift that a founder remains alive among his sons. Without this plan for the future which they receive from him, the community would be incapable of understanding its own charism because it would have lost the drive that kept it going. Without that hope, it would be incapable of interpreting its past, because it would lack the prophetic spirit. It would be as if the People of God had lost the Promise! Similarly, the more LIBERMANN's charism is incarnate in us, the better we shall be able to take hold of the future and the greater will be our creativity.

"*The base of our European works will be among the poorest classes who, in France, need help badly; e.g. sailors, soldiers, workmen in general, the still more miserable class: galley-slaves, prisoners, beggars . . . These works are not opposed to either the end or the spirit expressed in the Rule. It is true that we did not think of them at the very beginning, but that is not a proof that God does not want them. We could not have thought of them then.*"

⁽¹⁾ Provisory Rule for Libermann's Missionaries, text and commentary, p. 25, art. VII.

God was leading us towards the work for the Blacks and nevertheless we felt the need to be more general, so much so that the Rule speaks in a general way of poor and abandoned souls." (N.D., IX, pp. 288-289).

We cannot have any basic criterion other than LIBERMANN's: it will always be in reference to the poorest and most abandoned that our choices must be made or re-evaluated. This requires that we be more attentive to situations than to countries, just as LIBERMANN was in his day.

We have to re-think his insight in today's context when we are being challenged by so many changes. There are still situations in which people are abandoned, neglected, but today's poor are not necessarily the same as the poor of LIBERMANN's time. Local Churches are developing, some of them are beginning to suffer. Could not "the poor" be Churches which are poor? Our manner of helping them and of being present to them must take this evolution into account.

There is no question of abandoning the Third World, – just the contrary! But the de-Christianizing of the West becomes more and more of a worry and areas of first evangelization call to us from just about everywhere in the world. The 1974 General Chapter gave a clear orientation of the Mission to "*all the continents*." (G.A., 2).

To which poor do we go?

Our priority is still the same: "*those who have not yet heard, or have scarcely heard, the Message of Christ*" (C.D.D., 1 and G.A., 3). In our Spiritan tradition these have always taken precedence. The frontiers have always been the choicest places for Spiritans.

We must also take new factors into account: the growing strength of the young Churches in Africa and Asia, the new outlook of the Church in Latin America, – these have brought

about a considerable evolution in the Mission. We have come a long way since immense territories were confided to missionary Institutes for first evangelization. Mission is becoming more and more a matter of exchange, of mutual giving, of getting beyond ecclesial frontiers.

We shall always be available for urgent missionary situations, especially for those which find no other response in the Church. There are many of them in the missionary Church today. Reports from our circumscriptions stress, for example, that the urban ministry in large cities is becoming more and more a priority.

Since development is the new name for peace (Paul VI), we, as witness of Christ in the Mission, must today give greater attention to the strong current of individuals and peoples striving for liberation. "The mission of preaching the Gospel today requires a radical commitment to the integral liberation of man, as of now, in the very reality of his existence in the world." (1971 Synod; also G.A., 4). This duty falls upon us both "in the missions" and in our home countries, and it is an aspect of our missionary obligation.

We are also challenged by the phenomenon of the migration of peoples: in Europe and America there are many groups of people who came from elsewhere. We find on our doorstep, as immigrants, students and workers who used to be on the other side of the world. This new factor, in its very massiveness, makes the usual geographical criterion lose some of its absoluteness and justifies the extension of the idea of Mission as presented in the documents of the 1974 General Chapter.

The Congregation has every right today to recognize new commitments to the new "poorest and most abandoned" as coming within its specific end, and hence as fully Spiritan works. Perhaps our habits make it difficult for us to qualify these new works as "missionary", but all the same they take their place within our very best Spiritan traditions.

"... In all this variety, what should be the principal element of unity? The common trait of all Spiritans should be that they are concerned with, partial to, in solidarity with, the missionary commitments of the Congregation and its work for the poorest people. This is the very heart of our Spiritan vocation. This can be done in many ways. This concern, this pre-occupation, must be present regardless of our assignment in the Province. It should make itself evident, in one way or another, in our life-style and in the life-style of our communities. This should be the characteristic trait of our common spirit. It should carry over into our work. We should radiate around us the missionary spirit: awakening the consciousness of people to their responsibility towards the poor and the disinherited, for greater justice for all; and being attentive to the work of attracting missionary vocations." (Extracts from a Letter of Father Timmermans, Superior General, to the confreres in one of our Provinces.)